



February 2, 1886: The First Groundhog Day in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania

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To cite this article: Sean Potter (2008) February 2, 1886: The First Groundhog Day in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, Weatherwise, 61:1, 16-17, DOI: [10.3200/WEWI.61.1.16-17](https://doi.org/10.3200/WEWI.61.1.16-17)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3200/WEWI.61.1.16-17>



Published online: 07 Aug 2010.



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U.S. Army Signal Service Daily Weather Map for February 2, 1886, the day that marked the beginning of the Groundhog Day tradition in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. Pittsburgh, the closest station to Punxsutawney, reported cloudy skies at 7:00 a.m. EST.

Weather folklore is filled with significant dates on which certain events are said to foretell future climatic conditions* But no date in the weather almanac has achieved the level of

awareness, attention, and almost cultlike status that February 2, also known as Groundhog Day, has achieved* According to legend, if a groundhog emerges from its burrow after months of hibernating and sees its shadow on this date, it will be

frightened back into its den, signaling six more weeks of winter* If a groundhog does not see its shadow, it is a clear sign that an early spring is on its way*

The tradition has many incarnations, with several famous groundhogs around

the country vying for the media's attention. Arguably the most celebrated Groundhog Day ceremony occurs just outside the small town of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, about 90 miles northeast of Pittsburgh. Each year this town is host to thousands of spectators (as many as 30,000 in recent years), who huddle together in the predawn hours while awaiting the appearance of the world's most famous forecaster: Punxsutawney Phil.

While the origin of Groundhog Day remains uncertain, one explanation is that the tradition derives from the European celebration of Candlemas (The Feast of the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple), which falls roughly halfway between the Winter Solstice and the Vernal Equinox. It was thought that if the sun shone on that day, cold weather would continue for six more weeks. German folklore claims that if a badger sees its shadow on Candlemas, he will remain in his den for six (some versions say four) weeks while winter-like weather rages on outside.

The Pennsylvania Dutch, who emigrated from Germany to Pennsylvania in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, switched the badger for a groundhog, an animal that they found in abundance in the area. The earliest reference to a groundhog foretelling the arrival of spring on February 2 is thought to come from the diary of Berks County, Pennsylvania, storekeeper James Morris, who wrote on February 4, 1841, "Last Tuesday, the 2nd, was Candlemas day, the day on which, according to the Germans, the groundhog peeps out of his winter quarters and if he sees his shadow, he pops back for another six weeks' nap, but if the day be cloudy he remains out, as the weather is to be moderate."

It would be another 45 years before Punxsutawney got in on the act. On February 2, 1886, Clymer Freas, an editor for the local newspaper, *The Punxsutawney*



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Groundhog Club claims 100 percent accuracy for Phil, an analysis published online by the National Climatic Data Center (NCDC) that compared Phil's predictions from 1988 to 2003 with monthly national average temperature departures for February and March found "no predictive skill for the groundhog" during this period. Going back to 1895 (the earliest data available), Phil's prediction for a persistent winter matched up with the national temperature trends about 44 percent of the time.

Groundhog Day humor even made its way into a February 2, 2007, Area

Spirit, published a notice that proclaimed, "Today is groundhog day and up to the time of going to press the beast has not seen its shadow."

According to the Signal Service Daily Weather Map for 7:00 a.m. EST that day, Punxsutawney lay to the southeast of an area of low pressure centered over central Ontario. Pittsburgh (the nearest station plotted on the map) reported cloudy conditions, while to the north, heavy snow was falling in Erie and Buffalo.

In 1887 locals made the first trip to Gobbler's Knob, located about a mile outside of town, for the annual prediction. Freas helped organize the group, naming them The Punxsutawney Groundhog Club. Members of the club's "Inner Circle" still don top hats and tails each year as they take center stage alongside the star of the show, whose official name is "Punxsutawney Phil, Seer of Seers, Sage of Sages, Prognosticator of Prognosticators and Weather Prophet Extraordinary." As an early promoter of Groundhog Day in Punxsutawney, Freas also coined the town's title of "Weather Capital of the World."

Records kept by the club reveal that since 1887, Phil has seen his shadow 96 times and not seen it only 14 times, with no record for 9 of the years. Although the

Forecast Discussion issued by the National Weather Service Forecast Office in Lincoln, Illinois, which included the following statement:

Despite the good agreement between the members of a U.S./Canadian rodent-based ensemble of prognosticating groundhogs... none of which saw their shadows this morning...much colder air will continue to filter into the region through the day today...and into the weekend.

Still, despite his apparent inability to compete with human forecasters or computer models, Phil's popularity hasn't faded among his fans. Over the years this Seer of Seers from Gobbler's Knob has hobnobbed with President Ronald Reagan and Oprah Winfrey, had his prediction televised on the jumbotron in Times Square, and been portrayed on the big screen in the 1993 film *Groundhog Day*, starring Bill Murray. (For more on this, see "He's Not a Weatherman...But He Plays One on TV," on page 26.) Perhaps Phil's real claim to fame, however, is his ability to put Punxsutawney on the map and turn a relatively obscure superstition about the weather into a national fascination. **W**

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